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BERGSONISM IN ENGLAND

M. BERGSON has told us that on the arena of Europe to-day we have a spectacle of "life" in arms against "matter." He takes the two terms to express respectively the spirit of his own nation and that of the enemy. We may take them as expressing at least the alternatives between which his own philosophy moves. On the arena of the universe as a whole life and matter are in conflict and his philosophy seeks to decide between the two. Which is the ultimate reality? Which is to be explained by the other? Is life a product of matter or is the truth the other way, has matter itself been created by life? Bergson's works may be considered to constitute an elaborate answer to this question, and to decide it in favor of the latter alternative. He thus takes rank as a champion of the living against the dead. But the main position against which he argues—what one could call roughly scientific naturalism—is one with which philosophy in this country has long been accustomed to deal, and with a like result. Now that Bergson's philosophy may be said to have struck its first roots in this country, the time seems opportune for a comparison. We might with profit compare what he has to say with what the philosophy of the past two generations has been teaching. From some points of view it seems as though his special followers did not realize sufficiently the likeness of the two ways of thinking. Nor do they seem to have seen as yet how much some of Bergson's most

valued positions seem to invite and indeed to demand strengthening by reference to matters which have been developed at least partially by the older idealism, and which are absent from him.

The opportunity for making the comparison is ready to our hand. As is well known, the head and front of Bergson's English following has come to be pretty much identified with Dr. H. Wildon Carr. While his work, *The Philosophy of Change*,¹ shows the influence of Bergson at every turn, and while Dr. Carr does not conceal his conviction that Bergson's is the most successful attempt yet made to deal with the questions of metaphysics, still it would be wrong to say that in this work he has merely been expounding another man's thought. He makes the endeavor to restate Bergson's central principle and to substantiate it by fresh applications; and a glance at the main topics will serve, we believe, to give a fairly true view of one important feature of Bergson's thinking which it is necessary to take account of, if we would bring its relation to English thought properly into focus. It will show us the *kind of questions* which figure in Bergson's pages.

The recurring topic is matter and spirit and the problems which arise out of their relation. For instance, is mind produced by the brain? If so, how could mind ever get at what is outside of this brain? for apparently mind can reach not only what is outside of it but what is even separated from it by immeasurable gulfs of space and time. Or, what are we to make of the question as to the constitution of matter, now that recent discoveries seem to resolve the material atom into something that is not a substance at all but only so much electricity? Then there are the problems connected with the relation of conscious mind to movement. Why is it that a higher form of consciousness, in the animal world, is so constantly accompanied by

¹ Macmillan & Co., 1914.

an increased capability on the animal's part of choosing its movements? There is further the nature of life itself. How are we to construe the fact that the whole past of every living being appears to be recorded in its present structure? And again there is the law of evolution and its ways of working. How is it that in a material world supposed to be governed by mechanical law, evolution can bend and govern the most dissimilar series of conditions so as to produce a like result—as when (to cull an illustration from Bergson himself) the series of conditions which produces a mollusk and the very different series which produces a vertebrate animal should both alike end in the one result, the endowment of the creature with an eye?

An outstanding characteristic of the whole way of thought will be apparent from this cursory survey. Its leading questions are such as would arise in the course of the study of natural science. They are questions which would occur to a scientist with philosophical interests. No doubt the motive which impels the mind to raise them lies far back in the perennial human sources of the philosophizing habit. But the actual questions raised come straight out of modern physics, mathematics, biology and psychology. They don't arise out of a study of the history of philosophical disputes. This is characteristic of Bergson. He is preeminently one of the writers who attack problems, not other people's solutions of problems. Hence his philosophical freshness. He does indeed deal with the history of thought. He deals also with some of the standing controversies of current philosophy. But these are not the center of his interest. He does not begin with these. His speculation thus acquires an interest for scientific minds which most philosophy does not possess. And it is perhaps not altogether fanciful to say that this feature gives his thought from the outset a certain advantage with the English mind. Moreover, in Dr. Carr Bergson seems to have

found a follower whose interests also are preeminently in the concrete present. The central matter with him seems to be, not what can we make of the systems of the past, but rather what can we make of the report which the sciences give us now of the world we are in; what is important is that report and the right interpretation of it.

Fortunately, however, what we have just referred to as the perennial sources of all philosophy—the great hypotheses of our emotional nature—are touched upon by Dr. Carr much less lightly and less fleetingly than by his master. He even makes bold to adopt as a heading for one of his later chapters the well-known words in which Kant summed up the whole demands of our higher emotional nature, the phrase “God, Freedom and Immortality.” It is a fortunate circumstance for the comparison which we have in hand. In Kant we have the original source of that general idealistic view in philosophy which has practically held the field in English teaching until recently and with which we wish to compare Bergson’s. These postulates will therefore give us a starting-point. We can compare what light upon them has been derived from the older sources, with what has been given to us by Bergson. And we can compare the two philosophies further as regards their ability to justify what they have to say on these things, and give a reason for the hope that is in them.

Before we can consider what light Bergson throws upon ultimate questions, or compare it with any derived from elsewhere, we must first try to gain some rough idea of his general view. It is clearly impossible to go into detail. We cannot indicate Bergson’s actual answers to the questions we have cited above, still less his answers to all the questions of which these are only a few taken at random. But it may be possible to indicate his principle. It may be possible to point out what in the universe Berg-

son especially sees and values; what it is which he believes to be capable of providing a solution to these and all the various problems with which he deals. It is in point of fact nothing else than that *élan vital* which has figured so often in the reviews of the new French philosophy, that vital impulse which we behold forcing itself along the whole course of evolution and of which in the long run Bergson holds the universe itself to be the creation.

With this mere hint of the view, let us turn at once to the question how it stands to the idealism which has been taught in England and which finds its classical English expression in the writings of T. H. Green,—how it stands, especially, as regards an attitude to problems which are of the last importance for the human mind.

In the first place there are striking general resemblances. In Green's doctrine as in Bergson's the fundamental reality of the universe is not matter but consciousness. Like the former view, Bergsonism professes nevertheless to be neither "idealism" nor "realism" *simpliciter*. And up to a point it adduces the same reason for repudiating the former of these titles—for refusing, i. e., to identify its teaching with any such "idealism" as is usually associated with the name of Berkeley. The reason in both cases is this. The reality of the world, though for both views it is consciousness, is not for either of them anything constituted simply by our private minds. No thesis is put forward by either theory to the effect that you and I and other minds like us are all that exist. The consciousness referred to is in the literal sense universal. It is over all the universe, a feature of the whole of it. No such doctrine is put forward from either quarter as that the universe which we usually see and know does not exist. What is said is that it is conscious and is the product of its consciousness. But, for Bergsonism, that self-creative consciousness which the universe is differs from our private

minds also in another way, a way reminiscent of Schopenhauer as well as of the neo-Kantian idealism of Green. That consciousness is not preeminently representative or pictorial. It is active. Not the static picture of knowledge is its characteristic expression, but the energy of will.

In consciousness so conceived, then, Bergsonism finds the key to the broad facts of life and evolution as science has revealed them to us. In the evolutionary history of life on this planet—in the genesis and progress of vegetable world, animal kingdom and man—what we have is this active consciousness in the form of life, pushing itself, as it were, through the surface of matter and seeking free way. Man's physical organism is the one configuration of matter through which it finds the free course which it seeks. The human body is organized for giving outlet to this activity. The brain and nervous system are but its cutting edge by means of which it thrusts itself forward. The story of evolution is the story of how the main current of this vital impulse has worked its devious way through matter. The different forms of life which we see are the different channels into which the central stream has split itself up in process of thrusting itself into matter. The central stream has not quite dissipated itself as yet into these branches. The main current is still traceable. It is found in the life and consciousness of man. It is for this reason that man is at the head of creation. His life and mind contain the most complete concentration to be found anywhere of what was in the original world-impulse. The fundamental reality of the universe, then, is life; but it is a life which comes to view best, not in the plant or the animal but in the *conscious* life of man. We must note further that the "matter" through which the stream of life thrusts itself is in the last resort its own creation, though we need not go into Bergson's proof of that here. The vital impulse is thus creative of matter and of all the forms

of life in which it finds an outlet, and the whole process of its advance is named by Bergson "creative evolution."

Some such view is the only one capable, in Bergson's opinion, of meeting the necessities of the case which natural science has presented to us. Dr. Carr has endeavored to go further and show that as a general view it is specially in harmony with some quite recent scientific discoveries. The "vital impulse" is nothing if it is not movement. It is, in fact, pure movement. If it be creative of "things" then somehow things must be generated out of movement. And this, Dr. Carr points out, is precisely what science is now finding.

"The essential principle of the philosophy of change," he says, "is that movement is original. Things are derived from movement, and movement is not a quality or character that things have added to themselves."² "A very few years ago," he says again, "such a doctrine would have sounded paradoxical and absurd. But now compare the philosophical doctrine of original movement with the new theories of science. Let us take first the structure of the atom. The electrical theory of matter teaches that the atom is composed of a central mass or core, which is far the larger part of its substance, and an envelope small in comparison. The central core is positive electricity, and the outer envelope consists of negatively electrified particles held in position by the electrical relation to the central core. The atom, in fact, is a solar system in which the positive element is the sun and the negative element the planets. And all the qualities of atoms depend upon the arrangement of these outer negative elements. But what is the ultimate reality of this atom—something or other that is electrified? No, it is electricity, not something electrified, and electricity is a form of energy, and energy degrades and disperses.

² *Philosophy of Change*, p. 11.

Reduced to simple everyday concepts it is this, that what we call matter is a form of movement."⁸

But it is not merely in the case of the atom that recent discoveries have tended to resolve into terms of movement what we had been accustomed to regard under quite other terms; elsewhere also they have begun to transform the static into the changing, the resting into the active.

"But now turn to the other side," Dr. Carr continues (pp. 17-18). "In the last few years it has been possible to demonstrate that our solar system is not, as was supposed, at rest in an absolute space or else moving, if it be moving, without regard to forces outside itself. It belongs to a larger system, all the parts of which are in movement in relation to one another. The fifty million stars that our telescopes reveal are not scattered at random over the firmament, but are moving along regular courses coordinated to one another. The members of this stellar system are not, like the planets, revolving round a central mass, but millions of suns are streaming across an unoccupied center. The speed of our sun (now about $12\frac{1}{2}$ miles a second) has been calculated, and its direction and the acceleration it will undergo as it travels across the center and passes outward again to the periphery. This, however, is not all. A discovery has been announced that seems likely to extend indefinitely further than astronomers have yet imagined the vastness of the spatial universe. Observations which have been made on the great spiral nebula in Andromeda show that its spectrum is inconsistent with the hitherto generally held supposition that it consists of gaseous matter in a state of extreme tenuity. It is now said to be a spectrum that is given out by solid glowing masses, and thus seems to confirm an old view that the nebulae are star groups immensely distant. This nebula is apparently not within our stellar system, but itself a vast stellar system

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

lying outside the latter and at an enormous distance away from it. What other systems lie outside these we do not know, but all that we discover suggests universal movement. There is no absolute rest. If we conceive an observer placed anywhere in this great universe that we look out upon from our position on an insignificant planet of an insignificant sun, whether we suppose him to gather into one embrace what to us are vast stellar systems or to be confined to the negatively charged ion of a hydrogen atom, there will stretch out for him on either side an unlimited expanse of reality of which the ultimate essence is movement."

And Dr. Carr finds a suggestion of the same point, viz., that things are not more original than movement but that movement is more original than things, in the way in which the recent "principle of relativity" in physics threatens to transform our conceptions of space and time and remove the ether from its place as a scientific hypothesis. All this seems to him to confirm the view expressed by Bergson in *La préception de changement*: "Movement is the reality itself, and what we call rest (*immobilité*) is a certain state of things identical with or analogous to that which is produced when two trains are moving with the same velocity in the same direction on parallel rails; each train appears then to be stationary to the travelers seated in the other." And again: "There are changes, but there are not things that change; change does not need a support. There are movements, but there are not necessarily constant objects which are moved; movement does not imply something that is movable."

The discovery that the whole universe is movement is, however, very little, if we know nothing about this movement except simply that it moves. Even when we have brought it so far that we can regard this movement as life,

as creative, and as able at last to burst into consciousness, we have not even then got very far philosophically unless we learn something of the inner character of this vast spiritual force. On its inner character too must rest our judgment upon Dr. Carr's bold claim for the "new method," that it is nothing less than a revolution and that it has reversed the direction that philosophy has followed throughout its history of 2500 years.⁴ It is on the subject of the inner character of this movement that Bergson's teaching most directly challenges comparison with that of Green; and, we may add, most clearly demands to be supplemented by it.

For Bergson is by no means the only teacher who has conceived of a universal spiritual energy as sustaining the universe. Green teaches the same. In the words of by far the ablest existing short exposition of it, the central conception of his philosophy "is that the universe is a single, eternal, activity or energy of which it is the essence to be self-conscious."⁵ Nor can we get a distinction for Bergson out of his repeated claim that the spiritual activity of which he is thinking is not purely conceptual, because Green in essentials makes the same claim. A great deal is made by Bergson of the non-conceptual character of true philosophical apprehension. You cannot apprehend that ultimate essence or spiritual force whereby the universe exists, in the ordinary way; that is, by the intellect. The reason why, is that the intellect can only apprehend what is dead, static, given. It cannot grasp living movement. Now Green has quite as little use as Bergson has for what can only grasp the given or static. Natural science, for Bergson, is based on the intellect and that is why it cannot conduct us into the presence of what verily explains things.

⁴ See *Philosophy of Change*, p. 20.

⁵ R. L. Nettleship in his biography of Green: *Green's Works*, Vol. III, p. lxxv.

Science only sees in the universe what is dead, and therefore it cannot exhibit its ultimate spiritual essence. This is Green's complaint too. Green, indeed, does not say that we must appeal to something else than the intellect (this is Bergson's way of putting the matter), but he does say that we must understand the intellect. We must not be content to use it uncritically, as natural science and naive common sense do. We must lay hold of life and activity with it. But Green is clear that the life and activity of which the intellect must lay hold, is its own. His philosophic creed, shortly stated, is that this is possible—that intellect, itself an energy, will reveal a spiritual energy at the heart of the universe, if it be persevered with and rightly used. Green does not say so in these words. But his philosophy says so to any one who has entered into it. He insists on the one hand that reason and will are one, in the sense that they are alike expressions of one principle;⁶ and he speaks constantly of that principle as active and as self-active. His phrase is "self-realizing." On the other hand, his whole contention against the empirical school in philosophy was that this self-activity, the essence of men's minds, was not in men's minds alone. It was the essence of the universe. The spiritual principle was "in knowledge," and also it was "in nature," as the most elementary student of his chief work soon learns to know. Practically all he had to say about nature in fact was just this: that it was not inert, dead, merely given; that it was a spiritual life, of which our individual minds were the highest finite manifestation. So far Green and Bergson are on common grounds.

There is, however, a real divergence between Bergson's and the older teaching. They differ in their doctrine of time. Both agree that what we can see around us with

⁶ See, *inter alia*, *Works*, II, p. 329.

the bodily eye is not the ultimate spiritual energy but its manifestations only. Even with the eye of the mind, they both hold, the ultimate spirit itself cannot be apprehended in its whole nature, for only part of its original totality is contained in the mind of man. But they differ as to what it is in its own whole nature. With Green it is in itself already perfect, whereas with Bergson it is still developing and changing with the course of time and has an immense and entirely uncertain future ahead of it. With Green the ultimate spirit is complete, with Bergson it is incomplete. With Green it is a consciousness, morally and intellectually all that we could conceive ourselves becoming. With Bergson it is a consciousness still always turning into something different and turning always into something which could not have been predicted.

At this point also occurs the most marked difference of the two doctrines in regard to the light which they cast upon the assumptions of the moral and religious consciousness. And as regards religion, it is not hard to judge which is in the stronger position. So far as the religious mind has entertained the belief that behind the phenomena of the universe and acting as their source, there exists a mind which is eternal, one who is above time and vicissitude, who is perfect and is not subjected to change, a God "who was and is and ever will be," in so far it will find its faith countenanced in Green's teaching but discountenanced in Bergson's. Dr. Carr himself is clear that the change Bergson's theory invites us to make in our religious conceptions is profound, though he thinks that it has compensations.

"How is the conception of God affected by the principle of this new philosophy? One attribute that has seemed to attach to this conception can certainly not belong to it—eternity, in the sense of timelessness. Reality is essentially movement, movement is duration, duration is change. If

we call the original impulse of life God, then God is not a unity that merely resumes in itself the multiplicity of time existence, a unity that sums up the given. God has nothing of the already made. He is not perfect in the sense that He is eternally complete, that He endures without changing. He is unceasing life, action, freedom.

"No more profound change can be imagined in the conception of the universe, in the conception of human nature, in the whole outlook of life, than is involved in this new conception of God. The conception of God to which we have been accustomed in philosophy,—the most perfect being, the *ens realissimum*, the first cause, the *causa sui*, the end or final cause,—is the conception of a reality which time does not affect. Hence the continual attempt both in ancient and modern philosophy to conceive two orders or kinds of existence, the temporal and the eternal, and the whole problem of philosophy has been to conceive the relation of these two orders to one another. Time and the whole order of changing reality must, it has seemed, be of the nature of an emanation from God, or a manifestation of God. But however conceived, the time order is regarded as essentially unreal, appearance and not reality; change and movement are relative to us."

Connected with the same difference in regard to time, there is again a difference of the two theories as regards the light they throw upon another of the Kantian postulates. So far as the religious consciousness has fixed its hope on immortality in the sense of a life out of time Bergsonism can offer no corroboration, for time and the change which constitutes it are to this philosophy reality itself, and to be out of time is *ipso facto* to be out of existence. Here again the older view is considerably different. For it the idea of a life beyond time is at least not contradictory. Nay, any completing or perfecting of our best life here

⁷ *Philosophy of Change*, pp. 187-188.

would inevitably have this character, since for this view we are already above time in so far as we think what is true and do what is unselfish.

As regards the postulates of God and immortality, then, the effect of Bergsonism is of a negative character. But these are preeminently religious postulates. The point upon which Bergsonism claims most confidently to have substantiated our higher emotional demands is in regard to the moral postulate, that of freedom. In its clearness upon this question, indeed, Dr. Carr finds the chief compensation for its attitude upon the others.

"The philosophy of change does not sound any clear and confident note as to what lies beyond us in the unseen world. It does not present to us God as the loving father of the human race, whom He has begotten or created that intelligent beings may recognize Him and find happiness in communion with Him. There may be truth in this ideal, but it is no part of philosophy. Neither does it teach us the brotherhood of the human race—on the contrary it seems to insist that strife and conflict are the essential conditions of activity. Life is a struggle, and the opposing elements are the nature of life itself, the very principle of it. The evolution of life is the making explicit of what lies implicit in the original impulse. Philosophy reveals no ground for the belief in personal survival, and it shows us that however highly we prize our individuality we are the realization of the life-impulse which in producing us has produced also myriad other forms. What then is the attraction that this philosophy exercises? What is there of supreme value that it assures to us? The answer is freedom."⁸

Here at length we reach the philosophically important matter. For here we can interrogate the two views, not merely as to whether they can corroborate our religious

⁸ *Philosophy of Change*, pp. 195-186.

sense, but as to their grounds for doing so. The whole question for the critical evaluation of the philosophy of Bergson, it may be said, is that of the nature of and the evidence for the freedom which he says characterizes that ultimate spiritual force of which we are the offspring, and which by its vast uprush through the universe and through us creates us and the universe as it goes.

For Green too, as everybody knows, there is freedom. And he puts the *rationale* of it thus. Man is free, for him, both in his knowing and his acting, because in both of these functions the past is gathered up in the present which is now before him. Except this were so, says Green, we could not know. To know, is to know succession. Now if there were only succession itself—that is, if the past were not thus gathered up—there could be no consciousness thereof. This is straightforward reasoning, and at bottom quite simple. If I am gathering a bunch of flowers, I must hold the first ones in my hand while I gather the rest. If I did not do this but dropped each one as I picked it, I should never have a bunch. Quite similarly, if I hear or see a succession, say, of strokes upon a knocker, and if I *know* that it is a succession of five knocks, my knowing is evidence sufficient that the earlier strokes have not escaped me but have been gathered up in my mind and presented along with the last one. If each had disappeared as it occurred there would have been no succession of five for me. Each one would have been number one; and when it was over would have been nothing. To perceive time at all I must not merely have the present before me. I must have the past along with the present. In Green's phrase, the various members of the series must be "co-present" to consciousness.

Bergson has made an analysis of this same experience, and has given the matter profound attention. He too sees, that to know succession in the ordinary sense of knowl-

edge the members of the succession must be somehow co-present, but he gives the whole matter another turn. He cannot feel, apparently, that in knowing the successive as thus co-present we are really knowing the successive at all. His refrain therefore is, we *try* to know a time-succession by the ordinary use of our intellect, but cannot. We do not, in this fashion, know a time-succession. We only succeed in knowing space. In counting the strokes we set out the series of events in a row, along a line, in a kind of mental space. This we call perceiving their temporal succession. And if one asks, "Why does the intellect fail? how are we to apprehend time, or what would it be like if we would apprehend it?" the whole argument of Bergson's *Time and Free Will* converges in effect upon this answer: that the intellect which fails to apprehend time-succession fails because it can only set out the events *separately* along an imaginary spatial line, whereas for the "intuition" which really apprehends time these events are not separate, they interpenetrate. This interpenetration *is* time. It is fairly easy to see further how, out of the apprehension of such time, he gets free will. We have to pull ourselves together in order to grasp this interpenetration; and in this attitude, in this tense summoning of ourselves together, we are free.

We have here the fundamental impeachment of reason to which Bergson's philosophy seems compelled to have recourse. To reject the intellect as a means of attaining to the truth is an obvious weakness, as compared with the other view, thus far—that it is a species of self-subversion which the view with which we are contrasting it does not commit. Both Bergson and Green in philosophizing at all are endeavoring to settle their account with the problems of life by thinking them out. Both, in other words, are making use of the intellect. The difference between them in regard to the matter before us is that Green trusts the

instrument he is using. Having found what the intellect perceives time and succession to be, he says frankly that that is what they are. But Bergson, unable to accept the verdict, will rather make bold to say that our rational mind is incompetent, that it is incapable of seeing things as they are, and so has no authority in the case. This is a serious matter. One cannot feel, after this, that the intellect can be a very safe instrument to philosophize with. This is perhaps the rock on which all philosophies eventually split which attempt to reason the reader into preferring some supra-rational or sub-rational power before reason itself. Mere reason may not be fit to see what reality is; but if not, is it fit to attack itself either? We cannot endorse this intellectual abuse of the intellect. If the intellect cannot justify itself it cannot justify anything. We must accept the intellect, or our whole attitude is sceptical.

"But the intellect can't allow you free-will," it will be at once objected. This is an ancient objection, of which, as we shall see, Bergson himself shows us how to get the better. What, we have to ask,—what precisely is the freedom that Bergson's argument itself will bring us if it is true? It is easy for Dr. Carr to speak as if Bergson preserved for us the privilege of a wide choice in an open universe. All defenders of freedom have used such language. The question is, what evidence has he? What is there in our own experience that we can fall back upon and see that the universe is open before us? What reveals our identity with a universal principle of freedom which creates the universe itself, and in whose life we are free?

Whatever answer can be got out of Bergson to the question must come from the "interpenetration" just mentioned. And on inquiry we find that it is a solid answer enough. We do get evidence of freedom. And it is from the "interpenetration" that we get it. Bergson is one of the few people who see where the freedom issue really lies.

In *Time and Free Will* he insists that freedom is to be looked for in the character of an act itself. It is the question "what was the act?" that is essential; not the question "what might it have been?" or "could it have been different?" What we have to ask about two alternative courses of conduct ahead of us, when we want to know whether we are free agents, is not "is either equally possible to me now?" but "what is the inner character of the one chosen when it does eventuate?" And he indicates, in language which might have been copied from Green, that our character must be in our act. "We are free," he says in *Time and Free Will*,⁹ "when our acts spring from our whole personality, when they express it, when they have that indefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his work. It is no use asserting that we are then yielding to the all-powerful influence of our character. Our character is still ourselves;" etc., etc. And what we learn from his lengthy subsequent discussion of the matter is simply this: that where "interpenetration" occurs, there our character is; where the multiplicity consciously present in us is made up of items which interpenetrate, there our personality has its seat. And where the multiplicity of interpenetrating states is at its maximum in the great, critical decisions of our life, there our freedom is at its maximum because our personality is so. "It is the whole soul. . . . which gives rise to the free decision; and the act will be so much the freer, the more the dynamic series with which it is connected tends to be the fundamental self."¹⁰

It takes a great effort, often, to draw the scattered multiplicity of our conscious states into this interpenetrating unity. And in his later work, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson tries to show that when this concentration of spirit

⁹ English Translation, p. 172.

¹⁰ *Time and Free Will*, p. 167.

is relaxed an order of freedom transforms itself into an external order of necessity. There is no disorder in spirit, but only these two opposite kinds of order. That is how he accounts for matter. It is the de-tension of the universal life-impulse. But the present point is, that an act is free when our personality is in it, and that happens when it is one such as gives outlet or utterance to a multiplicity of states held in an intense interpenetrating unity.

So far, Bergson conducts us along safe and solid ground. But let us not make a mystery of this interpenetration. The highest examples of it are to be found only rarely, no doubt. We find them in moments when the entire being of a richly endowed mind, all its desires, fears, hopes, knowledge, emotions, converge in one direction, meditate one high and hard decision, and that decision is taken. There you have that contracting together of the entire soul for the effort, of which Bergson speaks under so many similes, and which is perhaps the highest act of a life. But there are simpler examples. The simplest is the common experience we have already referred to—the mere watching a series of events go by. The vague impression left by the last “click” of a series to which we have not been attending will tell us, says Bergson, (if we start up afterwards and try to count how many we have missed) when we have counted enough. In such a case the objects we consciously count are set out in a sort of mental row. Not so the vague impression which acts as our standard and says to us when we have counted up, say, four, “that is enough.” This vague impression does itself contain four. It is an impression of four. But it contains them in a different way. In it they are not set out in a row, but interpenetrate. Its “four” character, its quadruplicity if you will, is a unique quality.

“Whilst I am writing these lines, the hour begins to strike upon a neighboring clock, but my inattentive ear

does not perceive it until several strokes have made themselves heard. Hence I have not counted them. Yet I only have to turn my attention backwards to count up the four strokes which have already sounded and add them to those which I hear. If, then, I question myself carefully on what has just taken place, I perceive that the first four sounds had struck my ear and even affected my consciousness, but that the sensations produced by each one of them, instead of being set side by side, had melted into one another in such a way as to give the whole a peculiar quality, to make a kind of musical phrase out of it. In order, then, to estimate retrospectively the number of strokes sounded, I tried to reconstruct this phrase in thought: my imagination made one stroke, then two, then three, and so long as it did not reach the exact number four, my feeling, when consulted, answered that the total effect was qualitatively different. It had thus ascertained in its own way the succession of four strokes, but quite otherwise than by a process of addition, and without bringing in the image of a juxtaposition of distinct terms. In a word, the number of strokes was perceived as a quality and not as a quantity; it is thus that duration is presented to immediate consciousness, and it retains this form so long as it does not give place to a symbolical representation derived from extensity.”¹¹

Now the freedom which Bergson secures, and which he says cannot be apprehended by the intellect but only by what he calls “intuition,” is this interpenetration. The intellect, he holds, cannot grasp it. But if we put aside his statement that the intellect cannot grasp this unity of interpenetrating items, and attend solely to his description of what the intellect is alleged not to be able to grasp, we find that his statement is quite wrong. The intellect can grasp it, and Green’s doctrine is precisely that it can. True, “interpenetration” is not a favorite word of Green’s. He

¹¹ *Time and Free Will*, Eng. Trans., pp. 127-128.

speaks of relation. He holds that the members of a succession in order to be known to our minds as a succession must be related; so related that they are co-present. But this interrelation which Bergson says is a misreading of time and a translation of it into mere "space symbolism" because the members don't interpenetrate, this intellectual apprehension of a succession, is already to Green precisely a complex of interpenetrating elements. True, the items are connected by relation, but relations are internal for Green. They are constitutive of the thing's character. The relations in which each thing stands to the others are what make its nature. The nature of all the others, therefore, enters into each, and that of each into all the others. They must interpenetrate; their natures do so as truly and literally as two brushes which have been stuck together. The fact is, it is altogether the same whether we say of certain elements that their mutual relations are internal to each of them, or that they penetrate one another.

"But this is not the interpretation that Bergson means," it will be replied at once. "This interrelation of Green's would never yield anything like freedom. What Bergson means is a vital interpenetration, not any dead static thing such as could be illustrated by the mere material interpenetration of the bristles of two brushes." Entirely so. The metaphor does not do justice to Bergson's position, and neither does it to Green's. With Bergson the interpenetration of the elements seen by "intuition" is vital, it is an intense living movement, and he strains language to express how the elements fuse together, melt into each other, inter-work and support a real life. But neither, with Green, are the objects of *the intellect* in a dead *relation*. A relation, with him, is a relating—a living activity, therefore. He has nothing to teach if he does not teach this. He has nothing to urge if he does not urge that a system of relations "implies a relating mind." And surely

no one ever took him to mean by that, that the implied "mind" merely made the system, set it down, and left it for ever alone to stand there, dead, cold and finished. The relations are alive. They are being kept up. They are a deed; and not a deed done but a deed ever a-doing. A relation of two things, with Green, is a supporting of them in an energy of ceaseless spiritual movement, in precisely the Bergsonian sense.

"But this movement constitutes the things, with Bergson; it is their source, the very stuff of which they are made." Even so with Green, and much he has been made to suffer for it! It is not, says Bergson, things which are first and which come to interpenetrate afterward. It is the movement or interpenetration which constitutes the things. It is not, says Green, things which are first and which come to be related or interpenetrated afterward. It is their relation or interpenetration which constitutes them. A thing is nothing apart from its relations.

So far as regards the tracing of reality to a spiritual source Bergson indeed uses a language which is different from that of the older idealists. But in this general matter his fundamental thought is accurately the same. The only difference is that the older teaching does not fall back on any special intuition in order to be assured that reality has a spiritual source. It relies on the more thorough application and the critical use of the intellect itself. It holds that this most important of truths still is truth, and that by those who persevere it may be reached by the same methods through which other convincing truth is reached, namely, by the exercise of reason.

But this one difference is a difference as of heaven and earth. By disparaging intellect it puts Bergson in the unhappy position of constantly needing to discredit that very faculty of "reasoning" upon which as a philosopher he

must stake his own results; and that is not the whole of the trouble. It also gives a false cast on the moral side to the entire physiognomy of his teaching. And with a glance at this we may close our review.

The significant point is that Bergson does not believe in the intellect, or in the typical object of the intellect, namely, space. By not believing in them we mean that he does not believe in their spirituality. Green does. Green finds in space itself that very interpenetration or spiritual movement which Bergson insists cannot be found there. He finds, that is to say, in the (spatial) object of the intellect something which fully answers the essentials of Bergson's description of the interpenetrating, while Bergson constantly speaks of this character in things as though it could not be seen at all intellectually, but only in glimpses, by the special power of apprehension which he calls intuition. Green, in a word, finds in the spatial-intellectual that reality and truth which Bergson can only find when all "space-symbolism" has been done away with. This is a serious difference. For this "space-symbolism," in the wide meaning which Bergson gives to it, is the very stuff and fiber of the moral life. His teaching therefore means that to be at the moral point of view is to be out of touch with the real truth of the world.

And unfortunately his actual ethical teaching bears out the suggestion. It is quite a mistake, we may note in passing, to say that Bergson has not written on ethics. It is true he has not written any book with that name. But he has a work the real burden of which is an interpretation of the moral and social life. This is his little treatise *On Laughter*. His thesis in that work is that laughter is a species of social castigation. It is designed to rid society of the conduct that provokes it. And the question for the moral implications of Bergson's teaching is, what is it whose destiny is thus to be socially castigated? Startling as the

answer may seem, it is the moral. It is called the mechanical. In the wide sense in which Bergson eventually uses the term, it is the intellectual-spatial. But in the concrete what is it? It is simply faithfulness to principle where such faithfulness is awkward. In other words it is the very soul of the moral life, if that is anything at all distinct from the "esthetic" life. This disbelief in space and the spatial, this disbelief in the negation which is at the root of these, is what the present writer has ventured to call the pessimism of Bergson.¹²

Without repeating here what has been worked out elsewhere,¹³ reference may be permitted to one little point in elucidation of this view. It concerns Bergson's first illustration in *Laughter*, his picture of the runner who stumbles and falls. It is a small matter, of course, but it has always struck the present writer as a peculiarly significant accident that Bergson should have opened an essay *On Laughter* by taking as his first example of the ridiculous precisely that figure which has served so many moralists for their type of the moral life. The runner of Bergson's illustration, as Bergson describes him, with his eagerness and his "rigidness," with his omitting to look where he is going, his stumbling over obstacles and his abundant inability to adapt his conduct as circumstances require, and follow the sinuosities of his crooked path, is indeed ridiculous. But it is only Bergson's light vein that makes him so. There is nothing essentially ludicrous about such a man. In essentials, he might be Bunyan's pilgrim fleeing toward the wicket-gate or St. Paul's runner, who also heeds nothing

¹² See articles in *The Hibbert Journal* for October 1912, *The International Journal of Ethics* for January 1914 and *Mind* for July 1913. Compare an article on "Bergson, Pragmatism and Schopenhauer" by Günther Jacobi in *The Monist*, Vol. XXII, pp. 593ff. The latter article, however, should be read with caution. The present writer has the best of reasons to believe that the marvelous correspondence in detail which exists between Bergson and the prince of pessimists is largely accidental. Bergson himself learned about it only after his own principles had been evolved into practically their mature shape.

¹³ In the article in *The International Journal of Ethics* referred to.

either right or left, but simply "presses toward the mark." Of course there would be nothing in a mere illustration as such, but this one is so absolutely well chosen. This *is* the type of man—this steadfast man, this man who just is *not* sinuous and yielding and pliable and graceful and free, this straight-going individual who cannot do anything but go straight—*this* is the type whose proper destiny, according to the whole tenor of the essay, is to be laughed out of society; this is the man for whom society has no use. "Since when?" some may feel inclined to ask, not without a tinge of indignation. We confess that to us, hitherto, society has seemed to have considerable need for him; nay, to have had, perhaps, prodigiously little use for the other sort in comparison.

Moreover it is the discovery of precisely what this social theory neglects, namely the spirituality in spatiality itself, that enables the idealist to endorse the religious consciousness of God as eternal and perfect, without losing the other point, equally important, that the divine nature must also be movement, activity, freedom. To science the natural-spatial world is a completed order. If such order implies spirit, then, there must be a completed mind. As for the compatibility of such completeness with freedom, the very reasons which make Bergson to see real, active, free spiritual life except in a present which has the past in it, make it impossible for the idealist to see the perfection of such freedom except in a living present charged not only with the whole past, but with the whole future as well. The whole of reality must interpenetrate as Bergson makes the reality which has so far elapsed do. That interpenetration, with its inner activity, movement and freedom, makes up the content of what the religious consciousness has conceived as the perfect mind of God. Its inward intensity is God's perfect life, which is also ours so far as we are both good and great.

With the claim then, which is put forward by most of Bergson's following here and elsewhere that his philosophy is both true and "new," we cannot agree. So far as we have been able to examine it, it differs from other idealism in an essentially philosophical way only when it has something to say which is indefensible. Bergson has done important work in matters which in this paper we have had to pass over because they are extra-philosophical. He has done great work in psychology; and he has also done great work in the interpretation of the actual story of evolution, by bringing out new facts there which could easily be shown to be as compatible with the classical idealistic defense of spirit as with his own. That kind of work is the limit, it seems to us, of his service; except indeed it be a service to have presented a great deal of the substance of idealism from an angle so entirely fresh as almost to transport the reader into the idealistic center of vision, without his suspecting that he is there. We are not convinced that this is a small service. Nay, rightly understood, there is perhaps no greater.

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